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DE RUEHWN #0085/01 0131404
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1646
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1357
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL
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DEPT FOR WHA/CAR AND WHA/OAS
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM VC XL
SUBJECT: ST. VINCENT OPPOSITION CHALLENGES ELECTION RESULTS

REF: A. 05 BRIDGETOWN 2417
1B. 05 BRIDGETOWN 2394
1C. 05 BRIDGETOWN 2377

1. (SBU) Summary: St. Vincent and the Grenadines opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) has challenged the outcome of the nation's December 7, 2005, election, in which the ruling Unity Labor Party (ULP) won 12 Parliamentary seats to the NDP's 3. Charging that voting irregularities could have altered the outcome in three close races that went to the ULP, the NDP has held a series of public demonstrations and dramatically walked out of the opening day of Parliament to protest the election results. A local NGO joined the opposition in criticizing international election observers, saying that representatives of CARICOM and the OAS were not in St. Vincent long enough to thoroughly observe the electoral process nor to declare the election free and fair. Critics, meanwhile, have called for the NDP and its supporters to accept the election results. The opposition, however, is unlikely to do so and is sure to continue its protest in an attempt to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Government of Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves. End summary.

Opposition Challenges Election Results

12. (U) Citing an "unprecedented level of irregularities," the opposition NDP has challenged the results of St. Vincent's December 7 election, which returned the ruling ULP to power. Despite pre-election predictions that PM Gonsalves's governing party could lose up to three races for Parliamentary seats (reftel C), the ULP succeeded in maintaining its 12 to 3 majority over the NDP (reftel A). The opposition, however, has claimed that irregularities could have affected the outcome in three extremely close races it lost by only 35, 24, and 16 votes, respectively. In each of the contested constituencies, the NDP cited evidence of unsealed ballot boxes, the deliberate destruction of cast ballots, and actions by electoral officials violating ballot secrecy, which would lead it to formally contest the results in court. The NDP also reiterated its complaint, first voiced before the election was held, that inaccuracies in the nation's list of eligible voters could contribute to electoral fraud. Both the Supervisor of Elections and the Government have denied that such irregularities occurred; the Government admitted there were problems with the list of eligible voters but denied that these allowed electoral fraud to occur.

Election Observers Criticized

¶13. (U) The opposition faulted international election observers from CARICOM and the OAS for failing to be in St. Vincent for more than a few days, which was insufficient to thoroughly monitor the electoral process. A non-partisan NGO, the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Human Rights Association (SVGHRA), separately criticized the observers for focusing too much on what occurred on election day and leaving St. Vincent before the counting of votes was completed in all constituencies. The NGO took issue with CARICOM and the OAS for having expressed satisfaction with the overall manner in which the election was conducted when they themselves found shortcomings in electoral procedures. In a statement, the SVGHRA said that the observers were "in no position to give a true picture of the overall electoral process" when the nation's "electoral machinery was seriously flawed." (Note: Two Emboffs from Embassy Bridgetown were part of the OAS observer team. See reftel B. End note.)

Government's Legitimacy Questioned

¶14. (U) To protest the election results, the opposition's three MPs walked out of the opening session of Parliament on December 27 and joined NDP supporters on the street. The opposition also held a candlelight march and other demonstrations where NDP leader Arnhim Eustace questioned the "moral authority" of PM Gonsalves's government. A prominent NDP member who lost one of the closer races for Parliament complained at a demonstration that the Government "hijacked⁸ the election and demanded the arrest of the Supervisor of

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Elections. Critics, including the editorial pages of St. Vincent's three major newspapers, have called for the opposition to accept the election results and allow the country to move forward.

Was the Election Free and Fair?

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The opposition's challenge is unsurprising considering that it warned of possible electoral irregularities prior to the December election. The NDP leadership appears to loathe PM Ralph Gonsalves and think him capable of just about anything. Considering that the ruling ULP was expected to remain in power, it seems unlikely that Gonsalves would have found it necessary to "hijack" the election. It does, however, appear suspicious that prior to the election it was thought possible that the ULP could lose three seats only to see the party win three (though not necessarily the same three) by the thinnest of margins.

¶16. (SBU) Comment continued: The criticism leveled against the CARICOM and OAS observer missions by both the opposition and an independent NGO appears justified to some degree. Neither organization was in the country for long, nor did they have many monitors at their disposal. While the election probably was, for the most part, free and fair, the presence of the observers has provided the Government with the political cover necessary to deny that any significant irregularities occurred.

GILROY